

Left: Shop selling Bollywood movies and CDs in Jackson Heights, New York. Right: Commuters on a rainy evening on Lexington Avenue in New York. Below: Passengers waiting for the bus at the Greyhound station in New York.

# An Indian's Bus Journey Across America

Text and photographs by SEBASTIAN JOHN

**T**he United States: it's on TV, on the radio, its flag is on everyone's T-shirts. In my mind, it was cowboys, hamburgers, football, the Statue of Liberty and so many other things. But all I had was an image, not reality. Just where does Hollywood's fantasy end and the reality of living, working and knowing the United States begin?

I grew up in India, Africa and the Middle East, but never knew when I would actually see

the United States. All that changed when I fell in love and got married to an American. Suddenly, the United States became my home. After I arrived in San Francisco in late 2006, I knew I had to learn fast—the people, the culture, the mannerisms and everything that made the place “American.”

So I suggested: Let's travel across the country on a Greyhound bus.

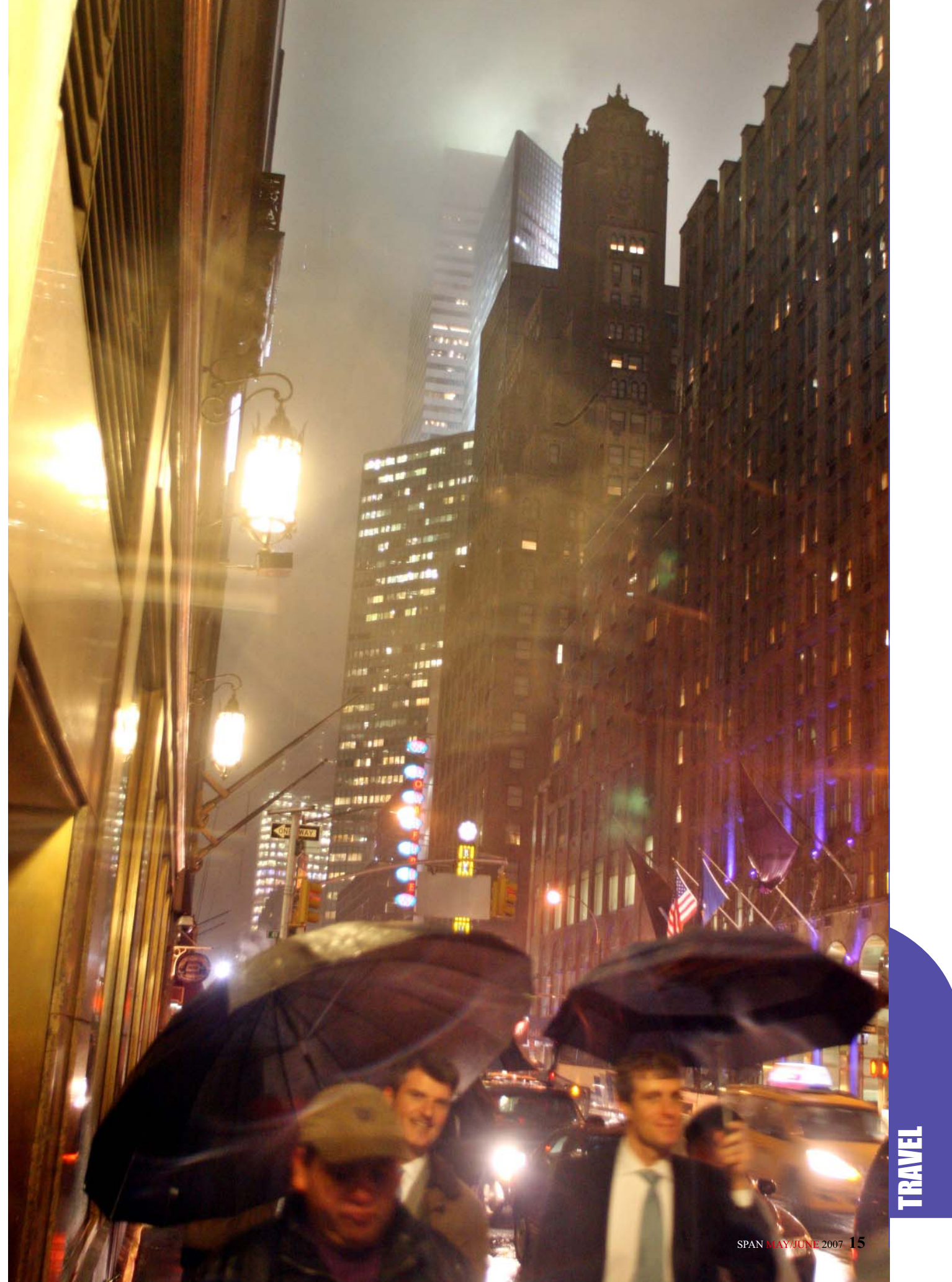
To my wife, a die-hard coastal dweller, the interior of the United

States was one great big question mark that held Texas, Chicago and lots of corn. “What does Kansas look like?” she wondered. I figured we should go and find out.

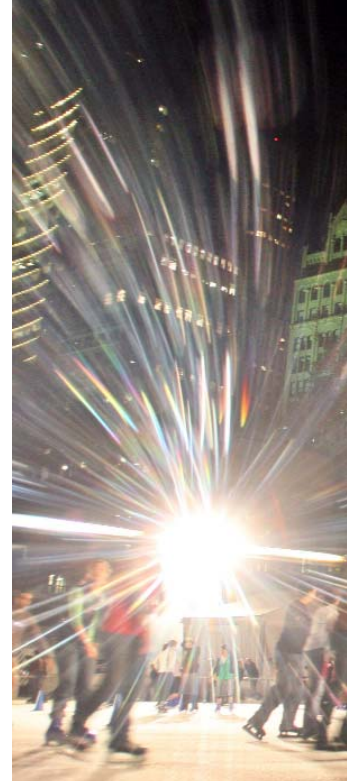
But family, friends, and even the staff at the Greyhound bus company counter rolled their eyes when they heard of our plan. Ask your average American about the Greyhound bus (or, unaffectionately, “The Dog”) and you'll likely get a sneer, some-











times coupled with a groan.

As a recent immigrant from India, where economical transportation often equals wooden seats and break-neck honking, I had a different reaction. The Greyhound was a cheap, comfortable, convenient and life-changing way to experience the United States for the first time. With 3,100 destinations in North America, I could go anywhere on the bus.

So, after long discussions at our local ticket office in Eureka, in northern California, we devised an epic trip from New York to Los Angeles. Charles at the ticket counter slogged over his computer, and got us a great deal—\$165 for each ticket with almost a month's worth of stops along the way. The 29-day, over 5,600-kilometer trip cost us around \$2,750 including hotel stays, food and entertainment. Beat that, Internet.

### The Beginning: New York City

We flew to New York City to start our trip on November 1.

It reminded me of Mumbai, the city where I was born. The ever moving mass of people, the hustle and shove at the train

stations, and the dream of making it big in The Big Apple.

I consider myself to be a city boy, but initially I was intimidated by New York. The city seemed to be living on 24-hour-a-day pulsating energy. The millions of lights on the countless billboards in Times Square, every man on the street in a stylish suit, every woman in top-of-the-line clothes and calf-length boots. And every New Yorker seemed to have perfected the haute attitude. I walked by a man in a pinstriped suit sitting and drinking coffee outside a café. He was barking on his cell phone, "Don't call me here; I'm busy."

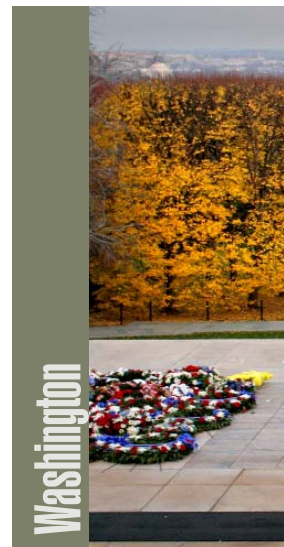
### Brooklyn

Staying at our friends' house in Brooklyn, one of the five boroughs, or districts, of New York City, I read the book *The Mole People* by journalist Jennifer Toth. It is about the life of, she says, thousands of people who live underground in the old tunnels of the subway, or metropolitan train system. Though the book has been criticized for its exaggerations and factual errors, it is true that a lot of people live in the tunnels, and I saw small signs of their presence, graffiti and blankets, as I whizzed past in the trains.

Budding musicians, newspa-

per and food stalls and commuters share the same trains in their daily pursuit of success. Exploring the art and architecture at the stations of the 100-year-old system is fun, too. I spent a substantial amount of my metro card just to see these stations, and would say that 77th Street, 36th Street, Broadway/Nassau Street and 14th Street/Union Square are worth exploring for their tile mosaics and art deco sensibility.

Beyond the glamor and glitter of midtown, each neighborhood of New York has its own identity. Wandering through Chinatown, the largest in the United States, reminded me of



Washington





*Far left: People buy fruit in New York's Chinatown.*

*Left: Ice skating in Bryant Park, New York.*

Bangkok. The streets narrowed down into alleys, English was no longer the official language, bargaining was acceptable, and the delectable smell of dimsum and Peking duck wafted through the air. Jackson Heights—with its incense, multi-color churidars, Bollywood songs and tandoori chicken—resembled Sarojini Nagar in New Delhi. Then there was the Bronx, the birthplace of hip-hop music and one of the centers, with Harlem, of African American culture in New York. Brooklyn, with its red brick townhouses, is home to the Irish and Hassidic Jews. A trip

to New York is like going around the world, and if you're lucky, you will hear 170 languages.

#### **First night on the Greyhound**

My wife had told me that Greyhound bus stations were mostly small, one-room affairs. The buses were supposedly empty and slightly dirty. But the Greyhound station at the Port Authority in New York was bigger than an average mid-town airport, with multiple departure gates.

The bus itself was clean, and the well padded reclining seats were a luxury compared to many of the government-

run buses in India. So far, so good. But en route, the first misery unfolded. At every major stop, passengers had to leave the bus (ostensibly for cleaning) and board again even if it was 3 a.m. This is the worst thing about the bus; if you can deal with it, you can enjoy the ride.

#### **Washington, D.C.**

I have lived most of my life in capital cities: Dar Es Salaam, New Delhi, Trivandrum. I always thought the sheer amount of power politics made the city and its inhabitants stereotypically guarded.

Yet Washington came across

to me as a friendly city, more relaxed than New York. People knew that they had the power, but didn't flaunt it, another contrast to New Delhi.

Maybe the architecture of the city had something to do with the cool attitude. The mostly neo-classical style government buildings, absence of tall skyscrapers, and rows of colorful townhouses left an impression.

We had reached Washington on Veterans Day (November 11), the day America remembers its soldiers. Hiking up the solemn hills to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, just outside the capital, I felt I was reading the history of America etched in stone. As the sun set, we watched the changing of the guard, a starkly simple ceremony that held meaning in every click of the soldiers' boots.

Washington also has something that I think no city in the world can offer, the famous

*Below left: A family has lunch under the Brooklyn Bridge in New York. Across the river is Manhattan.*

*Center: A sentinel at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, Washington, D.C.*

*Below: A view of Capitol Hill from Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C.*







Right: The Gateway Arch in St. Louis, Missouri. Right below: Chuck Berry performs at the Blueberry Hill club in St. Louis.

in the United States. But I still found St. Louis, stretching along the banks of the impressive Mississippi River, to be one of the most relaxed cities I have been to. Everything seemed to move in slow motion and the streets were never crowded.

The most famous site is the 190-meter tall Gateway Arch. Standing under it, the arch looked as if it was in perpetual motion, and the steel assumed a different personality with every change of weather.

A tour of St. Louis isn't complete, however, without seeing the beautiful Union Station, tasting beer at Budweiser's national headquarters and listening to rock and roll legend Chuck Berry at the historic Blueberry Hill club. Berry is one of the men credited with inventing rock and roll in the 1950s, with such hits as "Johnny B. Goode." Getting to see the 80-year-old Berry sing and dance in his famous one-legged hop in the Duck Room in the basement of the club needs some luck or planning. We were lucky: Berry happened to be playing the same week we were in town. Though the tickets were a pricey \$25, we would not have missed it for the world. And let me tell you, the man left the standing room-only crowd breathless.



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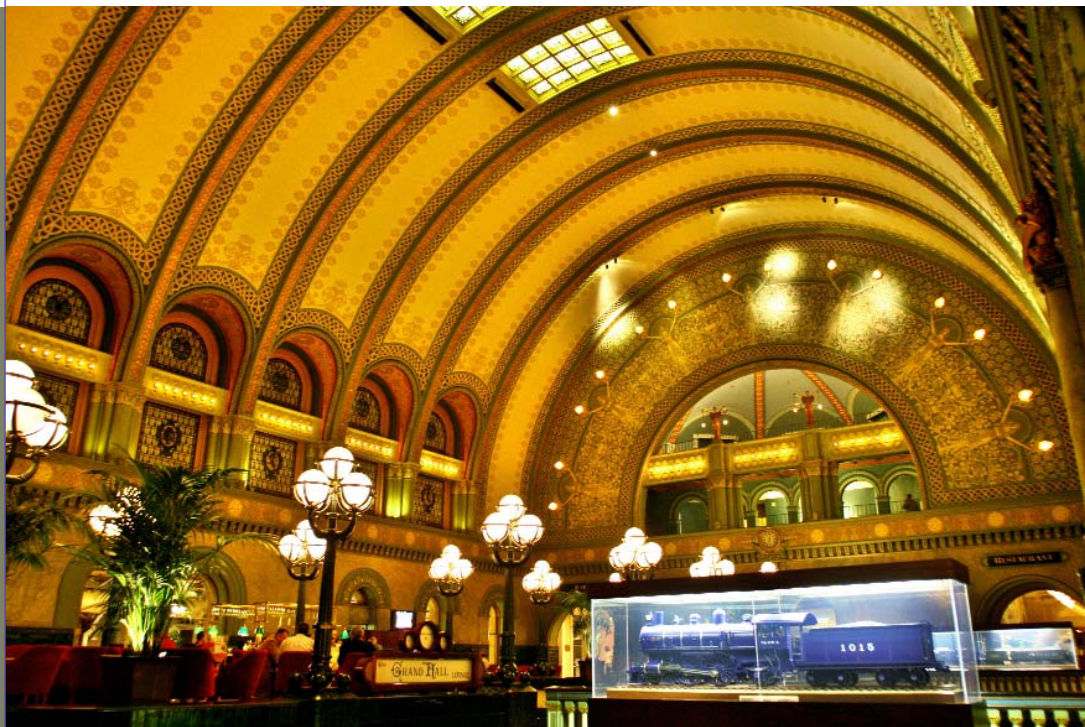
### St. Louis, Missouri

We were advised by many people to be careful while traveling in St. Louis; the city has one of the highest crime rates

true diversity of America. We chatted with a middle-aged white nurse, a Ghanaian from London, and a hunter from Alabama. Somehow, the conversation turned toward strange foods. The Ghanaian claimed to have eaten cat, a delicacy in his country, and the Alabama man compared its taste to possum and raccoon that his family shot in the forest. The nurse and I had both tried snake, and concluded that it did, in fact, taste just like chicken. My wife looked a bit

Continued in the July-August 2007 issue:

Denver, Grand Canyon, Las Vegas, Los Angeles



Union Station in St. Louis.

Smithsonian Museums. A friend had told me that one needs to dedicate three weeks to see all the museums. When my wife had to push me out of the National Museum of Natural History after five hours, I believed. I had seen only one of the 15 museums!

### Multicultural USA

Waiting for the bus at the Washington, D.C. Greyhound station, I got my taste of the



# Travel Tips



**T**he best way to find cheap rooms in the United States is to get on the Internet. Hotwire, Expedia, Orbitz and Priceline are all good bets; check them all to find the best deals.

Chain hotels are the safest option—regular hotel rooms but standards are high. Most cities also have YMCAs, and hostels with shared rooms and bunk beds. Chain motels are also an option: smaller, cheaper, easy to find and usually clean. But be careful of location.

If you have a car or the time to take public transportation, consider staying outside of town, as it will generally cost less. If you can't make a reservation ahead of time, expect 30 to 50 percent higher rates. Unless you're in town during a tourism wave or a festival, a smart traveler can find rooms in every city for under \$100.

## New York

**Move:** New York's iconic subway system will get you everywhere. \$2 fare.

**Free to see:** Central Park, Brooklyn Bridge, Staten Island Ferry, Jackson Heights, Wall Street, Times Square, Ground Zero.

**\$ but worth it:** Metropolitan Museum of Art, Empire State Building.

**Eat:** For cheap and fancy Indian food, Lexington Avenue in Manhattan, or Jackson Heights. For other cuisine, wander the city and follow your nose.

## Washington, D.C.

**Move:** The underground Metro is clean, convenient and will take you to all the main sights. On weekends train services are infrequent. Average ride is \$2.

**Free to see:** The Mall, Washington Monument, any Smithsonian Museum, Library of Congress, White House (no tour), Arlington National Cemetery.

**\$ but worth it:** Spy Museum, Capitol Steps comedy troupe at the Reagan Center.

**Eat:** A lot of Indian options. One of the most centrally located and tasty is Bombay Palace on K Street, near Farragut North Metro. Population is incredibly diverse, thanks to all the embassies. We counted at least 12 types of cuisine.

## St. Louis, Missouri

**Move:** The city has a well-kept, mostly above-ground light rail system. Though handy to get to sights like the zoo and The Loop, it's not comprehensive. Ask your hotel about the bus system, and the service times. Rail day passes are \$4.

**Free to see:** The Arch, Forest Park Zoo, Budweiser Brewery tastings and tours, Westward Expansion Museum, Laclede's Landing.

**\$ but worth it:** Blues concerts on The Loop, Riverboat Casinos, City Museum.

**Eat:** Moving away from the coasts, Indian restaurants start thinning out. However, you can get a decent curry fix at India's Rasoi near Forest Park. For tasty burgers, cocktails and fun, you have to stop at the historic Blueberry Hill restaurant and nightclub on Delmar Boulevard. Go to the bathroom to see the hallway of pictures of every celebrity you can think of, smiling and posing with the restaurant's owner.

—S.J.